

February 20, 2001: Commission Asks for Vigorous U.S. Diplomacy to Cite China, Iran, Sudan, and Others

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Writing on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Chairman Elliott Abrams wrote Secretary of State Colin Powell February 16 to ask for "vigorous efforts" to support resolutions at the UN Commission on Human Rights meeting in Geneva in support of resolutions condemning China, Iran, Sudan, and other countries for violations of religious freedom and other human rights. The text of the letter follows: Dear Secretary Powell: I am writing on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom with regard to the 57th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), which will be held in Geneva from March 19 to April 27, 2001. We understand that resolutions concerning human rights in a number of countries that engage in egregious violations of religious freedom will be considered during the upcoming session. The Commission urges you to undertake vigorous efforts - including bilateral and multilateral efforts to build coalitions and gain support - to ensure passage of resolutions condemning such violations in China, Sudan, Iran, and other countries. We recommend that you raise European Union co-sponsorship of the UNCHR resolutions when you host the EU foreign ministers on March 6. We also urge you to make religious freedom violations a prominent talking point in your discussions with Vice Premier Qian Qichen next month. With regard to China, as you know, for the past decade U.S. efforts to secure adoption of a resolution condemning China's human rights record have not been successful. The Commission urges you to mount a sustained campaign at the highest levels to convince other governments to support such a resolution at this year's session. In its first Annual Report of May 1, 2000, the Commission recommended that until the protection of religious freedom improved in China, the U.S. government, led by the President, should initiate and work strenuously to gain support for a resolution on China. Since the release of the Commission's report, China's religious freedom record has substantially deteriorated and become even more deplorable. In September 2000, China was again designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). * According to the State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom - 2000, the Chinese government's respect for religious freedom had "deteriorated markedly." In addition, the Chinese government has not agreed unconditionally to the resumption of a bilateral human rights dialogue with the U.S., which it had unilaterally suspended. The Commission believes that the strongest possible effort by the U.S. at the UNCHR to condemn the Chinese government will send the message that it cannot violently, systematically violate the right to freedom of religion or other human rights with impunity as far as its relations with the international community is concerned. With regard to Sudan, at last year's UNCHR session the U.S. refused to support the resolution that was eventually adopted, stating that the resolution did not directly address certain gross human rights violations, including slavery and the continuing bans by the Sudanese government on humanitarian relief flights. The Commission has determined that the government of Sudan is the world's most violent abuser of religious freedom, and in the past nine months conditions there have worsened. The U.S. should push vigorously for a resolution at this year's UNCHR session that clearly articulates the gross violations of human rights and humanitarian law committed by the Sudanese government - including bombings of civilian targets, slavery, persecution of religious minorities, and interference with humanitarian assistance - and in particular target European countries for support for such a resolution. In addition, as it did last year, the U.S. should not support a resolution on Sudan that does not meet these criteria. The conditions of religious freedom are very poor in Iran, particularly with respect to minority religious groups that are not officially recognized by the state and those perceived to be attempting to convert Muslims. Members of the Baha'i community suffer the worst forms of religious persecution at the hands of the state. In a letter to President Clinton dated November 1, 2000, the Commission recommended that the U.S. Administration should continue to support annual UNCHR resolutions condemning Iran's egregious and systematic violations of religious freedom and should recruit the support of other UNCHR member countries, until such violations cease. There are indications that support may be waning for a resolution that strongly condemns human rights violations in Iran, in spite of recent indications that the human rights situation is getting worse. In addition to China, Sudan, and Iran, egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion continue in Afghanistan, Burma, Iraq and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro). The U.S. should, in our view, continue to sponsor and/or support resolutions on human rights in those countries that condemn these religious freedom violations engaged in by the Taliban and others in Afghanistan and by the governments of the other countries. Finally, in July 2000, the Commission wrote to then-Secretary of State Albright and stated that, in addition to those countries discussed above, the Commission determined that the governments of Laos, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan had engaged in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom and thus merited designation as CPCs under IRFA. The information contained in the State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom - 2000 affirmed that these countries should have been designated as CPCs. Serious human rights violations (in areas other than religious freedom) are also reported to exist in each of these countries. No resolutions on any of these countries were considered during last year's UNCHR session. Their record on religious freedom warrants that resolutions be introduced and debated. Similarly, the U.S. should give careful consideration to sponsoring a resolution on the deteriorating situation in the Moluccas in Indonesia. Communal conflict there has reportedly claimed the lives of 5,000 to 8,000 Christians and Muslims since January 1999. While we do not believe that the Government of Indonesia is promoting violations of religious freedom, there is evidence that the Indonesian government has not

controlled its armed forces or the influx of armed groups from other islands, reportedly resulting in murder, forced mass resettlement, forced conversion to Islam, and torture. Thank you for your consideration of the Commission's recommendations. We are very grateful for your willingness to meet with the Commission, as stated in your letter of February 6th, and have asked the staff to consult with your Executive Secretariat about scheduling such a meeting. Sincerely, Elliott Abrams

Chairman * China is the only country designated by the State Department as a CPC in 1999 and 2000 where a resolution was not even debated at last year's UNCHR session.

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

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